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What Is Compassionate Conservatism?

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by Myron Magnet

Last week a trio of outraged Republican presidential contenders dismissed the idea of "compassionate conservatism," espoused by Texas Gov. George W. Bush, as hot air at best and, at worst, a slur on past Republican accomplishments. They are half right: Compassionate conservatism does represent a break with national Republican programs of the past. But far from being an empty slogan, it is a well-formed domestic policy agenda.

At its core is concern for the poor —not a traditional Republican preoccupation —and an explicit belief that government has a responsibility for poor Americans. From Richard Nixon on down, the policy of Republican presidents toward the poor seems to have been, in Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's indelible phrase, benign neglect. For Nixon this meant extending welfare programs he considered useless; for Ronald Reagan and George Bush it similarly meant paying scant attention to social issues. But more recently, several innovative Republican mayors and governors have made solving the problems of the urban underclass a top priority. Compassionate conservatism really is the effort to make these solutions central to national politics.

Can't Blame 'The System'

If compassionate conservatism breaks out of the traditional Republican mold, it utterly rejects the liberal conventional wisdom about uplifting the poor. The liberal worldview, which has reigned for over a generation, purveys such notions as that the only way to reduce crime is to cure its "root causes." Compassionate conservatism waves away the claim that such nostrums are the only possible expression of "compassion" for the poor. It acknowledges that liberal prescriptions, good intentions notwithstanding, have in fact made the lot of the poor worse over the last 35 years. Why else, after decades of growing opportunity, are the worst-off more mired in dependency, illegitimacy, drug use, school failure and crime than they were when the experiment began? Liberal compassion's main success is to make the self-styled compassionate feel good about their superior virtue. Compassionate conservatism derails the Democratic Party's greatest rhetorical advantage, its demonstrably empty claim of a monopoly on caring about the worst-off.

Compassionate conservatives call them comcons-offer a new way of thinking about the poor. They know that telling the poor that they are mere passive victims, whether of racism or of vast economic forces, is not only false but also destructive, paralyzing the poor with thoughts of their own helplessness and inadequacy. The poor need the larger society's moral support; they need to hear the message of personal responsibility and self-reliance, the optimistic assurance that if they try —as they must —they will make it. They need to know, too, that they can't blame "the system" for their own wrongdoing.

Guided by such ideas, state and local conservatives have hammered out effective new ways of helping the poor. The most visible of these is workfare, which began as an experiment by Govs. Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin and John Engler of Michigan long before congressional Republicans wrote the 1996 welfare reform act. Messrs. Thompson and Engler, as well as more recent welfare reformers like Gov. Bush of Texas and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York, don't see their main goal as saving money. The problem with welfare, they believe, is that instead of helping needy mothers raise sturdy children who go on to succeed in life, it perpetuates weak families, stuck in dependency for generations. As a way of life —which is what it has become —welfare degrades rather than uplifts too many of its supposed beneficiaries.

Work, by contrast, makes an individual responsible for herself and her family and thereby provides a road to self-respect and equal citizenship. So far, former welfare recipients forced out into the work force, even those who work very low-level jobs, tell reporters that they are finding it just that. And the prediction that the 1996 welfare reform law would produce legions of mothers and children starving on the streets turns out to have been ludicrous.

But workfare doesn't solve welfare's biggest problem: the harm it does to children. With one hand welfare enables the creation of single-parent families in which children fare poorly, while with the other it falsely pretends to secure the welfare of those children by dispensing money. Comcons have two solutions.

First, try to stop single women from having babies in the first place by restigmatizing illegitimacy. The mountain of research showing how badly children without fathers fare —as measured by school failure. divorce, criminality, mental illness, even suicide —is ample reason to show disapproval of women who put their babies at such risk. Recognizing that illegitimacy is perhaps the nation's No. I social problem, George W. Bush has repeatedly preached abstinence from sex until marriage. Even in anything-goes New York Mayor Giuliani warns about illegitimacy's dangers. It takes a certain courage for commons to make such statements, since the nonzero rightly recognize them as a call for across-the-board responsibility that will circumscribe their sexual behavior too —something they resist, as the national shoulder-shrugging over the Clinton sex scandal shows.

Second, since some women will still have illegitimate children despite renewed stigma, Gov. Bush has just set up four pilot residential hostels for welfare mothers and their babies-tough-love institutions, not handouts for the irresponsible, that will focus on making sure the babies get the nurture they need to be able to learn and to succeed, something that young welfare mothers often don't know how to provide. Private groups run the hostels —including, thanks to the "charitable choice" provision in the 1996 welfare reform act, a church-related group. They are able to provide the clearly, enunciated moral values that their residents, like most social-service clients, need to live by.

Comcons know that having safer neighborhoods is the one thing that most improves the lives of the poor. The activist policing that slashed New York City's overall murder rate has reduced murder even more in crime-ridden poor minority neighborhoods —by almost 90% in one. That means, contrary to the liberals' complaint that tougher policing oppresses poor minorities, that the law-abiding majority of inner-city communities can now send their children out for a loaf of bread or come home late from work without putting their lives on the line.

If public education has long been a bailiwick of the Democrats, comcons believe that without schools that work, poor children lack the traditional route into the American mainstream. After all, poor inner-city children are educable; Catholic schools prove it every day. But inner-city public schools today are a great national scandal, despite huge expenditures. Black and Hispanic students at 17 perform on a par with 13-year-old white students in every subject, and over half of inner-city kids don't graduate from high school. Comcons blame, among other culprits, teachers unions that put the employment of their members far above the education of children, and state education authorities that don't set high standards for teacher qualification or student achievement.

Tougher Tests

The comcon solution: much tougher tests for both teachers and students (as Texas has imposed charter schools (such as Arizona hopes to make virtually universal) and vouchers targeted to precisely the poor children whom the public schools are failing so grievously. In what may be an early indicator of the shape of comcon politics to come, Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin and former Gov. George Voinovich of Ohio formed alliances with minority parents that produced publicly funded voucher systems in Milwaukee and Cleveland. George W. Bush and Rudy Giuliani have also proposed experimental voucher districts. The point of these programs is to rescue minority kids from failing public schools right now, before another generation misses its chance —and also to provide the outside competition that will force the public schools to change their hidebound ways in order to survive, as is already happening in Milwaukee.

Finally, comcons like immigrants. They admire their energy and enterprise, which have revitalized vast swathes of New York and Los Angeles. The only danger is that this enthusiasm has sometimes led comcons to back policies that promote separatism and dependency, such as bilingual education or welfare benefits for immigrants. What made the urban immigration of yesteryear so successful is that immigrants universally came seeking opportunity to work, and they dreamed of becoming part of the American community. Comcons need to hold fast to this optimistic message.

An empty slogan? It may be that in the next election compassionate conservatism will change the face of American politics.

Mr. Magnet, editor of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal, is author of "The Dream and the Nightmare: The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass."

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